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ABSTRACT

In response to a new Taiwanese educational policy reducing the importance of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) education for non-English majors at the university level, a survey was undertaken of the 17 universities concerning their Freshman English for Non-majors (FENM) curricula and the degree of control over instruction held by teachers. Specifically, interviews with FENM coordinators from the institutions investigated the amount of influence teachers had on course content, class activities, instructional materials, and tests within the courses. Results indicate that a majority of FENM programs required their teachers to teach general language courses rather than special-topic courses of their own choice. However, a large majority did allow teachers to choose their own classroom activities, teaching materials, and testing methods. Implications for instructional development and areas for future research are discussed. Contains eight references. (MSE)

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English Programs for Non-English Majors at Universities in Taiwan

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English Programs for Non-English Majors at Universities in Taiwan

Abstract

To meet the changing needs of Taiwan, in 1993 the Ministry of Education (MOE) mandated a curricular policy that reduced the importance of English education for non-English majors at universities to make way for other foreign languages. At the same time the MOE gave universities more autonomy than in the past over the curricula of their English programs. Many English programs in turn gave their teachers more control over their teaching.

The purpose of this study is to examine the differences in the FENM (Freshman English for Non-Majors) curricula offered by 17 universities in Taiwan in 1995 in response to the MOE policy and the degree of control individual teachers had over their classrooms. The research questions are as follows: (1) What degree of control do individual teachers have over the content of the FENM courses they teach? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue? (2) What degree of control do individual teachers have over the class activities they use for FENM classes? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue? (3) What degree of control do individual teachers have over the choice of the FENM teaching materials they use? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue? (4) What degree of control do individual teachers have over the tests they used for FENM classes? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue? Eighteen FENM coordinators from 17 universities were interviewed.

The findings showed that the majority of the FENM programs required their teachers to teach general language courses rather than special-topic courses of their own choice. However, a large majority of the programs did allow teachers to choose their own classroom activities, teaching materials, and testing methods. Implications are discussed in terms of the adjustment teachers and program coordinators need to make when teachers are the major decision makers in their teaching.

Introduction

The Freshman English for Non-Majors (FENM) programs have always been a concern for many EFL researchers and teachers in Taiwan. Over the course of many years, these programs have gone through various changes, in response to government policies about English education and students' and teachers' changing ideas about language teaching.

In 1993 the MOE (the Ministry of Education) mandated that Freshman English would no longer be a required course for non-English majors at universities, but only one of the foreign languages freshmen have to study. However, universities are allowed leeway in implementing this policy in order to accommodate their individual situations. Since FENM has to compete with other foreign languages now, some programs have abandoned the practice of offering only one type of FENM and instead attempted to make their curricula more attractive by offering a variety of courses for students to choose from. However, some programs still offer only one type of FENM. Therefore it is of interest to researchers and teachers to find out what types of curricula are offered by universities.

Another issue of interest concerns the learning activities, teaching materials, and testing methods adopted in FENM courses. In the past, teachers without TEFL training were

sometimes hired because there were not enough teachers with adequate training in Taiwan. As a result, many programs retained a degree of control over their teachers by having them use certain learning activities, textbooks, and tests, in an attempt to ensure teaching quality. Since more teachers now have a TEFL background and are able to make their own pedagogical decisions, increasingly more programs are giving their teachers autonomy in teaching. Information about the degree of control current teachers have on their classroom activities, teaching materials, and tests would be useful for people interested in the FENM programs.

Therefore the research questions for this study are as follows.

1. What degree of control do individual teachers have over the content of the FENM courses they teach? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue?

2. What degree of control do individual teachers have over the class activities they use for FENM classes? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue?

3. What degree of control do individual teachers have over the choice of the FENM teaching materials they use? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue?

4. What degree of control do individual teachers have over the tests they used for FENM classes? How do the programs at various universities differ on this issue?

It is hoped that this study would provide valuable insights to teachers, FENM coordinators, university administrators, and MOE officials in their efforts to improve English Education in Taiwan.

Review of the Literature

Quite a few studies have been conducted on the FENM programs in Taiwan, and many of them were of the nature of a needs assessment. Only a small number of them have described to an extent the nature of the programs implemented. For example, Haakenson et al. (1992) reported that the ENM program implemented at Tunghai in 1992 focused on communication skills and the mechanics of language. Chang (1987) indicated that the College of Foreign Languages and College of Science and Engineering at the Fujen University focused on all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Kuo et al. (1990) reported that Chiaotung University also attempted to focus on all four skills. Lin et al. (1996) indicated that most teachers teaching at the National Chengchi University in 1993 emphasized reading. Similarly, Chang (1995) reported that the skill emphasized in the majority of the programs was reading. The above studies provide information about the foci of the programs, but so far there has been little research done about the content of the FENM courses taught at the universities. Only one study by Chang (1995) mentioned that in 1994 four of the universities in Taiwan offered a variety of FENM courses, each on a specific topic, for students to choose from. Since Chang did not give a detailed description of the courses offered at various universities, studies in this area are needed.

Concerning teachers' control over their teaching methods, Chang (1987) reported that the College of Foreign Languages and College of Science and Engineering at Fujen University allowed their FENM teachers to choose their teaching methods, and that the

cognitive/communicative approach was generally adopted. Lin et al. (1996) said that teachers teaching at the National Chengchi University in 1993 were allowed to choose their teaching activities and a list of favored activities was presented.

As to whether FENM teachers were allowed control over what teaching materials to use, a small number of studies have been conducted. Haakenson et al. (1992) reported that Tunghai University required their FENM teachers to use a unified syllabus and textbooks for students of each of three proficiency levels in 1992. However, Chang (1987) said the College of Foreign Languages and College of Science and Engineering at the Fujen University allowed teachers to choose their own materials. Lin et al. (1996) indicated that the National Chengchi University adopted the same policy in 1993.

Testing is another issue of interest. Haakenson et al. (1992) reported that the Tunghai program implemented in 1992 adopted a unified testing and grading system. Lin (1994) indicated that the National Chengchi University stopped using a unified final exam in 1989 and had allowed teachers to make their own tests since then.

The number of studies mentioned above is very small and most of them have limited their scope to the description of an individual program. Very little research has been conducted to provide a comprehensive picture of the various FENM programs implemented in Taiwan. Research of an extensive nature is greatly needed. The present study addresses this lack in the currently available research.

Methods

There were 20 universities In Taiwan, and within each there are one or two FENM programs. In this study, the researcher studied only 17 universities and excluded the three teachers' universities. This was done because the researcher wanted to investigate the FENM programs implemented at universities which serve a general purpose; teachers' universities, which aim specifically to train teachers, might have a different focus. At the 17 universities studied, there were 18 FENM programs. In this report, each of these 18 programs is referred to by the name of the university where it was offered. These 18 programs are Soochow, Fujen (A) (Colleges of Liberal Arts and Fine Arts), Fujen (F+S) (Colleges of Foreign Languages, Natural Sciences, and Life Science), Taiwan U. (the National Taiwan University), Chinese C. (the Chinese Culture University), Chengchi, Tamkung, Central U. (the National Central University), Chungyuan, Tsinghua, Chiaotung, Tunghai, Providence, Fengchia, Chunghsing, Chungcheng, Chengkung, and NSYSU (the National Sun-Yat-Sen University).

In order to understand what kinds of curricula were offered by the 18 programs, the coordinators in charge of these programs were interviewed in the spring and summer of 1996 (for interview questions, see Appendix). The interviews were conducted on the phone or in person, and the conversations were taperecorded. After a preliminary analysis of these conversations, many brief supplementary interviews were held to obtain missing information.

In order to make sure that the researcher had presented the data accurately when writing up this report, the first draft of the Results and Discussion part of this report was sent to the coordinators for confirmation. Based on their feedback, the draft was revised. This method, called insider checking, was recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1983).

Results and Discussion

Each of the following sections answers one of the research questions.

Teachers' Control over Content of FENM Courses

There were two types of FENM programs in terms of content. One focused on the training of general English ability in both semesters. The other offered a combination of courses for students to choose from in one or both semesters, with some focusing on general English skills and some on special topics.

A Focus on General English Skills (one-year)

Eleven programs fell under this category. They were Soochow, Fujen (A), Fujen (F+S), Chinese C., Chengchi, Tamkung, Chungyuan, Tunghai, Providence, Fengchia, and Chunghsing. Teachers in these programs appeared to believe that a general language foundation was important for freshmen. In Soochow, all the FENM classes aimed at general language training. However, in two programs, the language skills emphasized in the FENM offered for each college or department were somewhat different, although all the courses focused on general language training. In Fujen (F+S), Conversation was offered to the College of Foreign Languages, Reading and Conversation to the College of Natural Sciences, and Reading to the College of Life Science. In Fujen (A), students from all departments took an FENM course called Freshman Reading and Writing in both semesters, but students from the Music Department had to take an extra conversation course in the second semester.

A Combination of General English and Special-Topic Courses (in one or both semesters)

Seven programs were in this category: Taiwan U., Central U., Tsinghua, Chiaotung, Chungcheng, Chengkung, and NSYSU. Examples are provided below.

Central U.: Students chose among four courses: Journalistic English, English of Current Events, Literature Appreciation, and Conversation. Some of these were for one semester and others for two. Teachers decided which course to offer, based on their specialization. Before 1994, only one type of FENM was offered. In 1994, the program started to group six or seven departments together and offered the above courses for students to choose from. Some of the courses were about literature, and each of them focused on a different theme (e.g., death, love). In the fall of 1996, the FENM will evaluate how students like these themes and consider adding new ones.

Tsinghua: In the first semester, all students took the same type of FENM course that focused on general language training. In the second, they chose among the following three courses: Short Stories; English of Current Events; and Drama and Theater. It was hoped that the students would gain exposure to various cultures by studying topics in the humanities and thus enhance their appreciation for life and arts. In addition, by getting students interested in the themes offered in the various courses, the program planned to increase students' motivation to study English. The themes offered were decided upon by individual teachers, based on the rationale that teachers would be more effective if they were teaching

topics they liked. Before the second semester started, teachers wrote up course proposals for a committee to approve.

Chiaotung: The main focus of the FENM was on language skills. There were two sets of two-credit courses, a total of 14 courses: (1) Basic English courses: English Listening Comprehension, English Conversation, English Composition, and English Reading Comprehension; and (2) Advanced English courses: Current Issues, Practical English Composition, English for Science and Technology, Journalistic English, Listening Comprehension for Academic Lectures, Oral Report Skills, Oral Communication Skills, Business English, Literature Appreciation, and Practical Listening comprehension. Students were required to take a total of four credits. In principle, they were allowed to take any two courses from the two sets of courses, but in practice, they were advised to take two basic ones. Some advanced courses specified preference for juniors and/or seniors. (As of 1996, students are required to take two Basic English Courses in their freshman year and advised to take at least one Advanced English Course; or they were required to take a few courses in another foreign language to fulfill the language requirement of a minimum of six credits.)

NSYSU: There were three two-semester courses to choose from: Reading, Conversation, and Journalistic English. Individual teachers decided what to offer and each year the combination of courses might be different. These courses were designed for various proficiency levels, as defined by students' JCEE (Joint College Entrance Exam) English scores. For example, there was an advanced course for students who scored 70. There were also intermediate courses for those who scored 40. However, a student was not forced to take the one designed for his/her level. The program believed that few students would take courses that were too easy, because they would want to learn something from the course they took. In fact, most student did take the ones that fit their levels. In addition, there had been a strong demand for conversation classes, but few were offered each year, due to a lack of interest among teachers.

At least four programs changed from offering one type of FENM that emphasized general language training to offering several special-topic courses. These were Taiwan U., Central U., Chiaotung, and Chungcheng. In Chungcheng's case, in 1992, all freshmen had to take an FENM that focused on conversation in one semester and writing in the other. In 1993, they had to take an FENM that covered reading, conversation, and writing at the same time in both semesters. In 1994, still only one type of FENM was offered, but each teacher decided what to teach. Then in 1995, teachers decided to offer a large variety of FENM courses for students to choose from, with each focusing on a particular topic, believing that this would motivate students to learn. In Taiwan U., in the past, all students had to take one type of FENM, too. However, five or six years ago, teachers decided to offer various courses for students to choose from. As a result, there was a dramatic increase in students' learning motivation and an obvious drop in the absentee rate, as reported by teachers.

As shown above, in 1995 the majority of the programs seemed to favor offering one type of FENM that focused on the training of general language skills. However, there seemed to be a trend moving away from this and toward a curriculum that offers a larger variety of courses.

Teachers' Control over FENM Learning Activities

The 18 programs could be divided into two types in terms of the autonomy they gave teachers concerning what learning activities to use in FENM classes.

Teachers having complete autonomy.

In sixteen programs, teachers had complete control of classroom activities. They were Soochow, Fujen (A), Fujen (F+S), Taiwan U., Chinese C., Chengchi, Tamkung, Central U., Chungyuan, Tsinghua, Chiaotung, Chungcheng, Providence, Chunghsing, Chengkung, and NSYSU.

Teachers required to use certain learning activities.

In two FENM programs, Tunghai and Fengchia, all teachers were required to use certain learning activities. In Tunghai, in the first semester all students were required to write dialogues in groups and present them in a contest. In the second semester, students were required to present plays written by themselves in groups and compete not only within their own classes but also with other classes. For each semester, some types of oral and written tests were suggested to teachers. Teachers were also encouraged to adopt communicative and student-centered approaches to teaching. In Fengchia, students were required to write three compositions per semester, which were to be corrected by teachers and then sent to the Deans' office for examination. In the second semester, the compositions had to be word-processed.

Providence is an interesting case since the president of the university seemed to have a say in the teaching of FENM. The president recommended that all teachers require students to write two to three sentences each week and then correct these sentences for students. Some teachers did follow this recommendation but others ignored it.

As shown above, an overwhelming majority (89%, 16 out of 18) of the programs allowed their teachers to determine their own classroom activities. Most programs appeared to believe in giving teachers freedom to choose the means through which they achieved the goals of their programs.

Teachers' Control over FENM Teaching Materials

The programs could be classified into two kinds according to whether teachers were allowed to choose their own teaching materials.

Teachers having complete control of teaching materials.

Fifteen programs gave their teachers the freedom to choose their own teaching materials. These programs were Soochow, Fujen (A), Fujen (F+S), Taiwan U., Chinese C., Chengchi, Central U., Chungyuan, Tsinghua, Chiaotung, Chungcheng, Providence, Chunghsing, Chengkung, and NSYSU. As reported by the coordinator of Fujen (A), teachers greatly appreciated this freedom.

Teachers using teaching materials decided by the program.

Three programs required their teachers to use specific textbooks. In Tamkung, teachers used a book collaboratively written by teachers from a previous year. In Tunghai, a commercially-available book was chosen for students of each of the three proficiency levels. In Fengchia, one commercially-available book was chosen for all students.

As shown above, an overwhelming majority (83%, 15 out of 18) of the programs allowed their teachers to determine their own teaching materials. This was an indication that teachers were gaining autonomy. In the past, many programs hired teachers who had never had any training in language teaching because there were not enough trained teachers available. It was then perhaps necessary for coordinators to make many pedagogical decisions, such as the choice of textbooks, for these untrained teachers. However, by 1995 with the growing number of TEFL-trained teachers in the programs, most coordinators might have felt that there was no longer any need to tell teachers what to do. In addition, by 1995, with the influx of high-quality imported TEFL textbooks, there were many choices for teachers. Allowing individual teachers to choose their own teaching materials could be a way to avoid the conflict that might have arisen if each teacher had wanted a different book. This might have been the reason why a few programs, Chengchi, Taiwan U., and Chinese C., had changed from mandating unified teaching materials to allowing teachers to choose their own. Teachers appeared to appreciate such freedom, as indicated by some coordinators during the interviews.

Teachers' Control over FENM Mid-term and Final Exams

The programs could be divided into three types in terms of the degree of control they allowed teachers over mid-term and final exams.

Teachers having complete control.

In nine of the 18 programs teachers made their tests independently without following any regulations from the programs or universities. They were Fujen (A), Chungyuan, Tsinghua, Chiaotung, Providence, Chunghsing, Chungcheng, Chengkung, and NSYSU. For example, in Tsinghua, teachers were allowed to replace mid-term or final exams with reports or other assignments (even though most teachers still gave exams).

Teachers having partial control.

Six of the 18 programs allowed teachers to design their own mid-term and final exams but the teachers had to follow guidelines stipulated by the programs or universities. These programs were Fujen (F+S), Taiwan U., Chinese C., Chengchi, Tamkung, and Central U.. The guidelines concerned mostly the format of the tests, the weight each test should carry, and a score range. These guidelines were probably considered as a way to make testing consistent and thus fair to students in various classes. For example, in Tamkung, teachers as a group decided the weight each test should carry. In Chengchi, at the end of each semester, teachers shared information about the percentages of students that failed and the grades they assigned and then decided what adjustment to make on their grading. (However, they were under no obligation to do so.) They also shared their testing methods at meetings. In Central U., the coordinator tried to persuade teachers to use the same grading standards, i.e., how high or low the grades should be. In Chinese C., even though individual teachers made

their own tests, they all followed guidelines on the format of the tests. For example, a certain percentage of the test had to be devoted to testing vocabulary or sentence-making ability. There was also a section for short- or long-answer questions. In Taiwan U., teachers agreed that most scores should fall between 70 and 85. At the end of each semester, the Office of Studies published each teacher's score average and the highest and lowest scores. This information was distributed to all teachers and posted for all students. In Chunghsing, the mid-term and final exams accounted for 30 and 40% of the final grade respectively. When a teacher gave extremely high grades, the matter was brought up for discussion at a meeting.

Teachers required to use fully or partially unified tests.

Fully or partially unified mid-term or final exams were used by three programs. They were Soochow (partially), Tunghai, and Fengchia. In Soochow, the mid-term and final tests were divided into two parts, half on listening and half on reading. The listening part was further divided into two sections. The first section (60%) contained multiple choice questions written by teachers collaboratively. The second section (40%) was written by individual teachers for their own students. The reading part was designed by individual teachers. In Fengchia, each teacher wrote his/her own mid-term exams, but the final exams were prepared by all teachers together. In Tunghai, both the mid-term and final exams were designed by teachers collaboratively. Teachers had to follow guidelines on the weights to be given to each assessment activity (mid-term 25%, final 25%, quizzes 10%, oral assignments 15%, writing 15%, participation 10%).

As discussed above, a large majority of the programs (83%, 15 out of 18) gave teachers complete or partial freedom to make their own mid-term and final exams, indicating a trend toward autonomy. This may have been a result of the trend to give teachers autonomy in course content, pedagogy, and textbook selection, which made it impractical to use unified tests. Such autonomy was a break from the practice adopted by many programs in 1992, when they used unified textbooks and tests, as reported by Chang (1992).

Conclusions and Implications

It is hoped that this study will provide rich insights for current and future FENM coordinators, university administrators, and MOE officials about the FENM programs implemented in 1995 in Taiwan. The conclusions and teaching implications of this study are summarized below:

1. The majority of the 18 programs offered one type of FENM that aimed to teach general language skills. Apparently most programs still believed in building language competence through using general topics. However, there was a trend to move toward offering a variety of special-topic courses for students to choose from. Since these courses will compete with each other, teachers should take competition as a challenge to offer quality courses.

2. A large majority of the 18 programs allowed their teachers to choose their own classroom activities, teaching materials, and tests. The free hand teachers were given would certainly allow them to shape their teaching to suit their individual teaching styles and personalities, and also to make full use of the unique training each of them had. However, such autonomy might also reduce the opportunities teachers have to work together and learn from one another. Therefore, programs should create opportunities for teachers to learn together by inviting

teachers from within or outside the programs to give lectures or workshops. For example, coordinators could organize meetings for teachers to share the classroom activities they use. Since for each individual teacher to obtain teaching materials and review them is very time-consuming, programs should encourage teachers to work collaboratively on these tasks by sharing their resources and exchanging ideas about these resources, or invite outside speakers to introduce new teaching materials. In addition, because some teachers may be weaker in their ability to design tests, programs could organize workshops to help teachers analyze their tests in order to understand the strengths and weaknesses of them, to acquaint teachers with alternative assessment methods, etc.

Research on FENM, a course that all university students have to take, is valuable because teachers and program coordinators need to know what kinds of programs are offered in order to get ideas for designing and improving their own programs. Moreover, the MOE needs to know what programs are being implemented in order to understand whether it has stipulated appropriate curricular policies. Therefore comprehensive studies similar to this one, covering all the universities, should be conducted regularly. Other courses, such as Freshman English for English majors and English lab courses for majors and non-majors, could also benefit from such studies. In future research about FENM programs, researchers could examine a few aspects this study has not examined, such as the foreign language courses offered as an alternative to FENM, the various learning activities, teaching materials, and testing approaches adopted by teachers, etc.

It is hoped that more investigations into the FENM programs in Taiwan will be conducted in the future, and thus the MOE, programs coordinators, and teachers will be kept up to date about the programs implemented at a certain point in time. In this way, FENM programs will be better able to meet the English language needs of Taiwan's university students.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for FENM Coordinators

1. What kind(s) of FENM course(s) do you offer for your freshmen?

2. Is there any classroom activity required of all FENM teachers? (For example, all the FENM classes at Tunghai University have to participate in a play contest in the second semester.)

3. Are the teaching materials for FENM decided by individual teachers or a committee?

4. In your FENM program, are the students given the same mid-term and final exams? If no, do teachers follow certain testing guidelines as stipulated by the program? For example, some programs may stipulate that the mid-term and final exams should each account for 30% of the final grade. Other programs may ask all the teachers to have a section for vocabulary questions and a section for short-answer questions, etc. in the tests. What about your program?